

S-114
Robert L. Webster
Janes Island
public

1915

The Robert L. Webster is a skipjack of unprecedented size and capacity for the region measuring sixty feet in length twenty-feet four inches in breadth. Its capacity, according to the Coast Guard records, reached thirty-two tons under deck and two tons above deck. In conventional terms, the skipjack's capacity, as it related to its working ability, was expressed in numbers of bushels of oysters it could carry. The Webster had a 1,000 to 1,200-bushel capacity, whereas the norm of most of the oyster fleet hovered around 500 to 600 bushels.

The Robert L. Webster was assembled in 1915 by Sylvester Muir in Oriole and named for her initial owner. Between 1946 and 1971 the Robert L. was owned by Eldon Willing of Oriole.

INVENTORY FORM FOR STATE HISTORIC SITES SURVEY

1 NAME

HISTORIC

Skipjack Robert L. Webster

AND/OR COMMON

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

Jane's Island State Park

CITY, TOWN

Crisfield

VICINITY OF

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Maryland

COUNTY

Somerset

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

☐ DISTRICT☐ BUILDING(S)☒ STRUCTURE☐ SITE☐ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

☒ PUBLIC☐ PRIVATE☐ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

☐ IN PROCESS☐ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

☐ OCCUPIED☐ UNOCCUPIED☒ WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

☐ YES: RESTRICTED☒ YES: UNRESTRICTED☐ NO

PRESENT USE

☐ AGRICULTURE☐ MUSEUM☐ COMMERCIAL☒ PARK☐ EDUCATIONAL☐ PRIVATE RESIDENCE☐ ENTERTAINMENT☐ RELIGIOUS☐ GOVERNMENT☐ SCIENTIFIC☐ INDUSTRIAL☐ TRANSPORTATION☐ MILITARY☐ OTHER:**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Maryland Department of Natural Resources

Telephone #:

STREET & NUMBER

Taylor Avenue

CITY, TOWN

Annapolis

VICINITY OF

STATE, zip code

Maryland 21401

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

U.S. Treasury Dept., Bureau of Customs

Liber #:

Folio #:

STREET & NUMBER

Book 14, Instrument 44 (Oct. 18, 1946)

Book 14, Instrument 151 (Oct. 24, 1957)

CITY, TOWN

STATE

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

☐ FEDERAL ☐ STATE ☐ COUNTY ☐ LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

S-114

CONDITION

☐ EXCELLENT ☒ DETERIORATED
☐ GOOD ☐ RUINS
☐ FAIR ☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☒ UNALTERED
☐ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☐ ORIGINAL SITE
☒ MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Robert L. Webster is a skipjack of unprecedented size and capacity. It measures 60 feet in length by 20.3 feet in breadth. According to Coast Guard records, its capacity under tonnage deck is 32 tons, its capacity above deck is two tons. A skipjack is described in general terms as a variety of sloop, with one deck and outfitted with one mast, a billet stern and a square stern.

Its capacity in conventional terms, as it relates to its working career, is expressed colloquially in bushels (meaning bushels of oysters it is capable of carrying). The Webster has a 1,000-1,200-bushel capacity, substantially larger than most oystering craft; the norm is 500-600 bushels. Correspondingly, the usual number of crew members for a skipjack was five or six; the Webster required eight. Cabin accommodations for five men exist below deck on the Webster.

The body of the Robert L. Webster is fashioned primarily of pine which is cheaper and easier to work than most hardwoods. There are portions of the Webster which are of oak: a few of the framing members and the transom, as well as the gammon knee or longhead or cutwaterpiece which boat builder and restorer, Jim Richardson, replaced in 1975. (The gammon is the piece which fastens the bowsprit to the step of a ship by means of either rope or iron). According to Mr. Richardson, under whose supervision a few basic repairs were made in 1975 when the Webster was transferred from water to a land berth, the bowsprit was in serviceable shape.

At the same time, about half of the decking in the area of the mid deck was replaced with oak planks with dowels covering screw holes. Also eight beams supporting the decking were replaced with new oak members. New hatches (and hatchcoverings) were installed and rigging lines and running rigging were also replaced. Three of the original and now rare deadeyes from the Webster have been recently repaired by Mr. Richardson; he has replaced the pins and attached new chain plates. Deadeyes hold the wire rigging that stabilizes the mast and are now often replaced by turnbuckles. A new boom has also been installed and painted orange.

Much of the side planking is in badly deteriorated condition. Park Superintendent Maddox reports that small scale restoration efforts are planned which would replace a few of the boards with boards of similar width, but much of the other planking would simply be revarnished. The mast needs to be stripped again and revarnished.

The stern's horizontal planking is largely deteriorated with the white paint which covers the rest of the boat's wooden surfaces chipping off in patches. Several of these planks need immediate replacement or at least repainting. The rudder appears to be intact and original to the boat, though it has been often repainted. The double winches have been repainted with a silver preservative paint. Apparently the original rings, often replaced by turnbuckles today, which were used to attach the sails, are present and serviceable.

The two original trail boards bearing the ship's name have been removed, but are in the park's main office. They were restored recently, the old paint burnt off and the lettering reapplied in vivid colors.

CONTINUE ON SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		Maritime history	

SPECIFIC DATES 1915

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

Robert L. Webster

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Robert L. Webster is a significant example of a type of boat which possesses an illustrious past intertwined with the history of Chesapeake Bay commerce and sport. The skipjack breed represents the last commercial sailing fleet in the United States¹. It was a type of boat uniquely designed for oystering, a distinct species of craft but a product of the evolution of "flat bottomed and V-bottomed skiffs once common . . . on the lower Eastern Shore of Maryland"².

Shipbuilder and restoration craftsman James Richardson of Cambridge, Maryland, concurs that the skipjack was a natural development, a descendant of the "crab scrapers and oyster longboats" arrived at in an attempt to increase capacity, size and efficiency of oystering craft.³ Skipjacks were relatively easy to construct, and were as commodious a working boat under sail as was practically possible.

The first skipjacks to be developed, in the late 19th century, are described as follows:

The early boats were not flush-decked but . . . had a "sunk-platform" where hand winders for bringing in the dredges were located. In the first decade of this century the flush deck was generally adopted due to the increased use of the power winder. Heavy winders, putting strain on masts and rigging, also resulted in boats being fitted with shrouds.⁴

The term skipjack is locally derived but subject to regional variations:

. . . from Oxford to Deal Island the boats are known as bateaux, and the rig "skipjack". The typical skipjack with jib and mainsail is referred to as a two-sail bateau.⁵

The skipjack was locally built as well, most of the fleet having been produced at ports on the Eastern Shore from Talbot County, Maryland, south to Accomack County, Virginia; according to most sources the last substantive phase of skipjack building took place in the late 1940s in Crisfield and Wingate. (Wingate produced the Rosie Parks in the early 50s, a skipjack which is maintained as an exhibition at the Chesapeake Bay Marine Museum in St. Michael's, Maryland.)

CONTINUE ON SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Oral interview with Shipbuilder James Richardson, Richardson's Boat Yards, Cambridge Maryland
Brewington, M.V. Chesapeake Bay: A Pictorial Maritime History. Cambridge, Md: Cornell Maritime Press, 1956
Burgess, Robert H., Chesapeake Sailing Craft: Part 1, Cambridge Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1975,
CONTINUE ON SEPARATE SHEET IF NECESSARY

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY _____

9 CONTINUED

Wooden Shipbuilding and Small Craft Preservation, Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1978.

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE

COUNTY

STATE

COUNTY

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Ellen Coxe, Historic Sites Surveyor

ORGANIZATION

Maryland Historical Trust

DATE

August 1979

STREET & NUMBER

21 State Circle

TELEPHONE

269-2438

CITY OR TOWN

Annapolis

STATE

Maryland

The Maryland Historic Sites Inventory was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature, to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 Supplement.

The Survey and Inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

RETURN TO: Maryland Historical Trust
The Shaw House, 21 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401
(301) 267-1438

INVENTORY FORM FOR STATE HISTORIC SITES SURVEY

CONTINUATION SHEET

Skipjack Robert L. Webster (Description)

ITEM NUMBER 7

PAGE 2

A pulley located astern (for hauling the dredges in, also called a winder) bears the manufacturer's name ("MADESCO PRODUCTS, EASTON, PA.") as does the tiller wheel ("BOSTON MACHINE CO., BOSTON").

The interior of the hull is suffering from damage due to water retained in the hold which is destroying the raised paneled interior. When the skipjack was pulled from water to land, it was placed into a specially dug excavation where it now rests. Several bottom boards fell out at that time; they were coaxed back in to place and remain underneath the ship. The pit is lined with salt, and salt is poured along the edges of the pit each year, but this action, without other back-up programs involving systematic landfill, is insufficient to compensate for the rising water table of the surrounding area. The sporadic running of pumps cannot control the buildup of a reservoir in the bottom of the boat.

This pit is located several hundred feet from the shore line of the canal between Jane's Island and the mainland where the Webster was once moored. Pre-DNR acquisition, the Webster was probably stored like other such craft in the off season, "in shallows" until the fall when low waters float it and the judgment is made to sail it for another season.

INVENTORY FORM FOR STATE HISTORIC SITES SURVEY

CONTINUATION SHEET

Skipjack Robert L. Webster (Significance) ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

Although for the most part the skipjacks are historical artifacts, in isolated circumstances individual enthusiasts will produce one. Two men in Solomons, Calvert County, are presently constructing a skipjack fifty-five feet in length (five feet shy of the Webster) intended for oystering work.⁶

Several skipjacks remain in commercial use; a representative sampling includes: Four based at Tilghman Island, six in Crisfield area, a couple each in Whitehaven and Deale Island. Richardson estimates there are some twenty-five skipjacks presently licensed in Dorchester County; at the peak of their provenance, in the oystering trade, there were more than 200 of the craft in that county alone.⁷

The larger skipjacks were used also, on a sporadic basis, for small scale freighting operations, transporting fruit such as melons, hay, tomatoes short distances. Generally, though, this trade to the Bahamas was carried on by schooners and other craft with larger cargo capacities and the ability to resort to power over long distances.⁸

Some skipjacks were converted to pleasure yachts, a continuing process as evidenced by the traditional annual skipjack races at Deal Island and Sandy Point, both of which were won by the Webster under the captainship of former owner Eldon Welling of Chance, Maryland. The use of skipjacks as racing craft arose out of their working routine: at the end of an oystering day, when maximum catch from a particular area was achieved, the departure of the first boat to leave the "oyster rocks" (lumps or oyster beds)⁹ would constitute a signal for the other boats to leave and this collective exodus would amount to a race back to the Baltimore harbor where the boats would be divested of their cargoes, a procedure which generally took several hours. Naturally, the object of the race was to avoid being the last boat unloaded, and thus having the cargo sit for hours losing precious freshness.

The Robert L. Webster was built in 1915 at Oriole, Maryland, near Deal Island. Her 60' length and 20' breadth made her the "largest of her kind on the Bay",¹⁰ and indeed she remains the largest skipjack in existence.

Its first owner was its namesake, Robert L. Webster, who used the skipjack along with his son, another Deal Island waterman, commercially.

¹Robert H. Burgess, Chesapeake Sailing Craft: Part 1, Cambridge, Md.: Tidewater Publishers, 1975, p. 202.

²Ibid, op cit.

³Oral interview with James Richardson of Richardson's Boat Yard, Cambridge, 13 June 1979.

⁴Burgess, op cit.

⁵Ibid, op cit.

⁶Interview with James Richardson

⁷Ibid.

⁸Burgess, op cit.

⁹Interview with James Richardson

¹⁰Ibid

DONALD E. MACLAUCHLAN
Director
(301) 269-3776



7726 S-114
MARYLAND
FOREST AND PARK SERVICES
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

DAVID L. HATHWAY TUNIS J. LYON JAMES E. MALLOW
Staff Administrator State Forester State Park Administrator
269-3761 269-3776 269-3771

Tawes State Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

March 13, 1981

MEMORANDUM

TO: See Distribution

FROM: Ross Kimmel, MPS *RMK*

SUBJECT: Disposition of Skipjack Robert L. Webster

On March 12, 1981, the Department of Natural Resources sold the subject vessel to Mr. Buck Garvin of Tilghman Island for the sum of \$1,000.00 cash. Mr. Garvin intends to reuse all salvageable components of the vessel on his and other working skipjacks.

Because the vessel's worth did not exceed \$2,500.00, concurrence of the Board of Public Works was not required for this action. Mr. Pat Bright of DNR's Land and Property Management unit authorized the sale with the consent of Mr. James Mallow of the Park Service and Mr. Rodney Little of the Maryland Historical Trust.

Park Service is taking steps to retrieve from the Smithsonian Institution measured drawings of the skipjack believed to have been made by the WPA during the 1930's.

RMK:jlm

Distribution: James Mallow, MPS
✓ Rodney Little, MHT
Pat Bright, CAP
John Flewelling, POS

B I G A N

02'30"

Wear Pt

CAP

Flatcap Pt

Thru Cr

Red Hole

Rock Pond

Rock Hole

Lawsons Marsh

Acre Creek

Dougherty Cr

L A W S O

Skipjack
Robert L. Webster,
A.18/425550
4207240

70 000
FEET

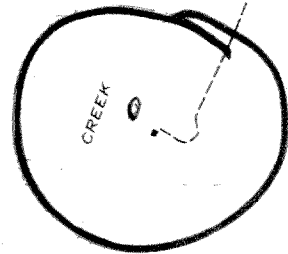
S-114

Marion, Md
Creek

Ward Creek

Acre

CANAL



CREEK

CRISFIELD Marsh

NO 7

West Creek

DAUGHERTY

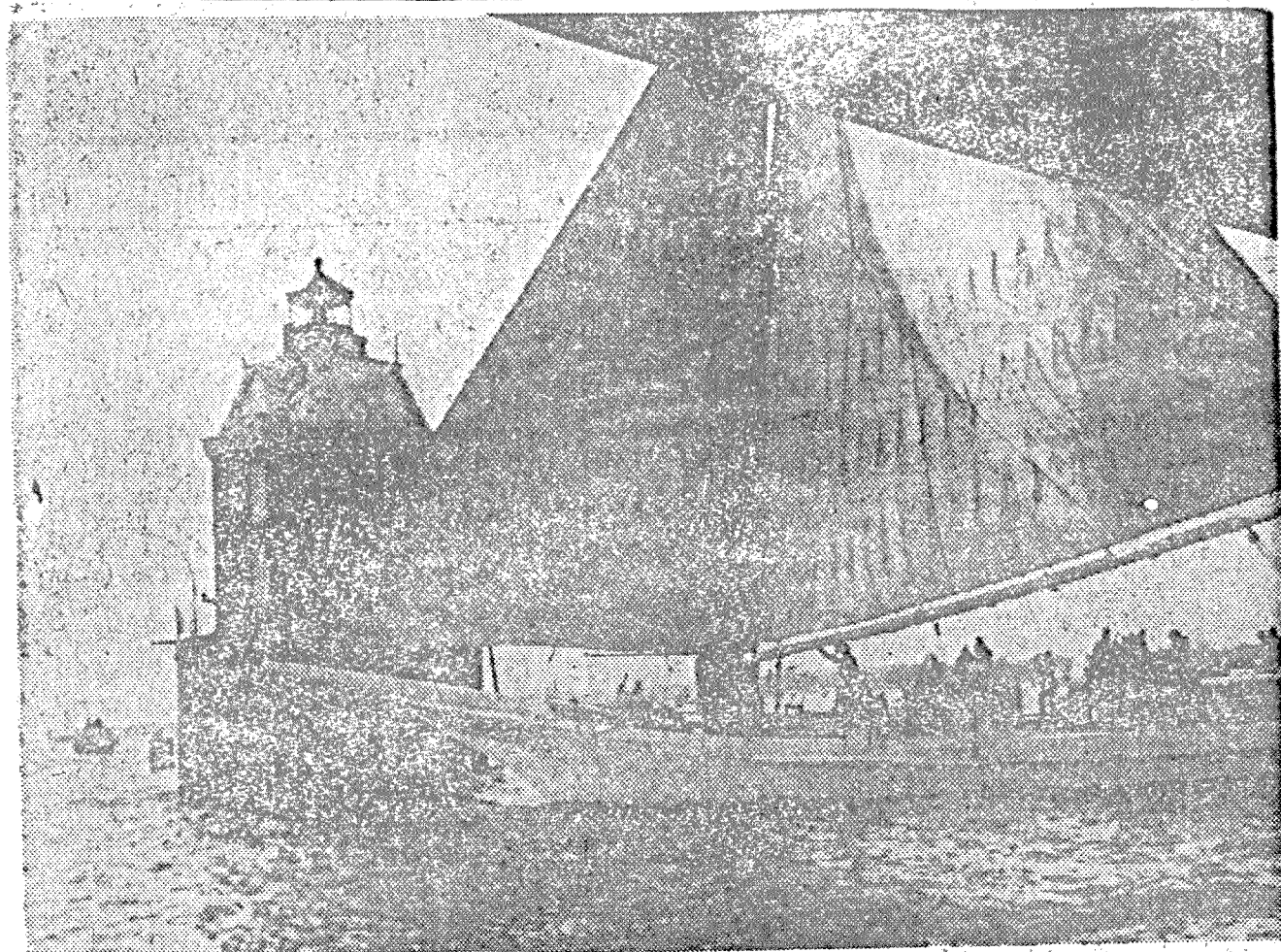
38°00'

75°52'30"

1130 000 FEET

460

EAT AND)



The Robert L. Webster, once the largest of the dwindling fleet of skipjacks, is now a shoreside monument near Crisfield.

This photograph was taken during the Chesapeake Appreciation Day races off Sandy Point in 1967.

No more oysters for the Robert L.

By James Holechek

"She was the biggest skipjack on the bay, the Robert L.," says her last skipper, Eldon Willing, Jr., of Chance.

His father had owned the 60-foot oyster boat (80 feet, sprit to stern) since 1946 and worked on her until he retired in 1971. He died last year at age 76.

The Robert L. Webster went to the "auster" beds for "drudgin'" every year for a week at a time. "We'd go as far as Pooles Island if there were oysters," says Willing. Today the oystermen come back to port almost every night.

Willing says the oysters are dead in the upper bay, adding, "They say things are pretty good down south." He has to depend on others for his information. Seven years ago he furled the sails on the Robert L. for the last time. He and his son, Eldon Willing 3d, now operate Scott's Cove, a 100-slip marina for pleasure boats in Chance.

In her prime, the Robert L. would lumber into her slip like a giant swan carrying upwards of 1,200 bushels of oysters on her crude wooden decks.

It is never easy getting the gear cleaned up, oiled and painted before the start of a season, but on November 1, the boats and men will head for the tonging grounds. It is an R month, and, although it's not true that bay oysters aren't just as succulent in July, the law protects the crustaceans in their spawning period. The "R" month idea comes from England where another species of oyster tastes gritty during the summer months.

Although the Robert L. Webster was big, she was easy to handle, according to Willing. "We've had her out in all kinds of weather, squalls to 80 knots, but never a problem," he says.

Below, the boat was fitted out like a waterman's home. The main aft cabin was used for eating and resting at the end of a long day. When evening came, the skipjack was sailed into the lee of a friendly shore. Early newspaper accounts claim the Robert L. could sail in 3½ feet of water. "Not so," says Willing. "She had a draft of 6 feet and when loaded needed 8

Boating

feet of water under her V bottom with the centerboard up."

Built by Sylvester Muir in Oriole, the Robert L. Webster was named for her first owner and launched in 1915. The 75-foot mast raked aft some 12 degrees. In all probability, her first sails were sewn together by Albert Brown. Her cleats, dead-eyes and chainplates were undoubtedly the products of Melvin Collier's forge in Wenona.

A few years before that time, hundreds of graceful skipjacks worked the rocks (beds) bringing up some 15 million bushels of oysters each year. Last year, according to Bill Bray, of the National Marine Fisheries Services in Easton, skipjacks harvested only 192,573 bushels.

North America's last commercial sailing fleet is fast running out of time. There are reports of 1,500 to 2,000 skipjacks plying the bay in the fleet's heyday. But reports say that fewer than 30 will be operating this year. Depending on which account you read, just 15 years ago there were 67, 75 or 80 skipjacks and bugeyes making up the fleet.

The old names are gone: Amy Mister is rotting away in the backwaters of a quiet

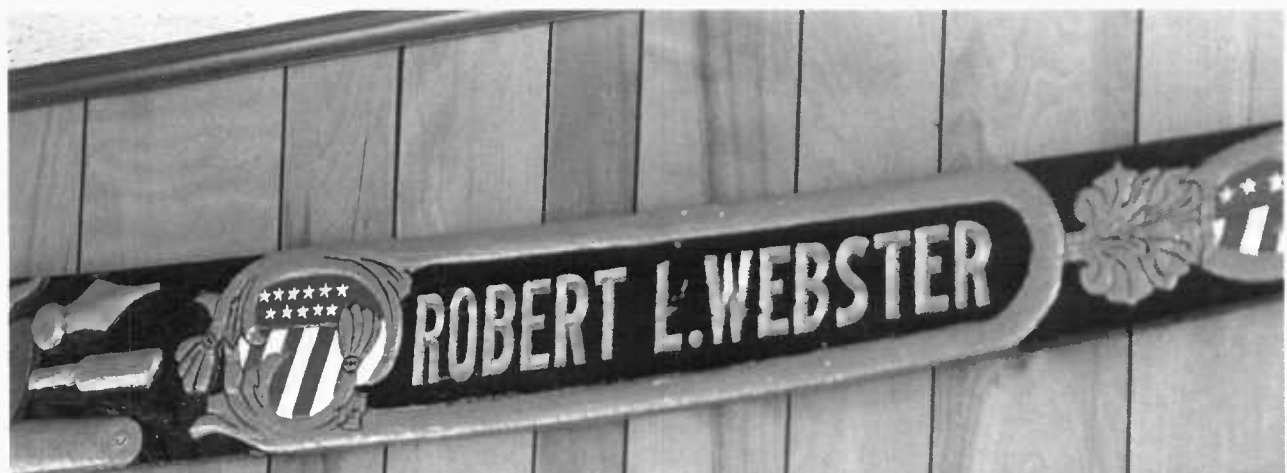
creek. Rosie Parks' has been an attraction in the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum is St. Michaels since April, 1977. Minnie V. died an ignominious death in Baltimore's Inner Harbor (a replica is being built). Lady Katie takes passengers for hire out of the marine museum at Solomons, and the Claude Somers sank in March, 1977, in the Hooper Straits, drowning all six hands. The heavy winds of January will never again buffet the Robert L. Webster. She rests on a pea gravel bed as a community monument in James Island State Park just outside Crisfield.

The tradition of the skipjack races goes back to the first day two of the boats returned to the docks to unload their catch. Over the years there have been sport races off Claiborne, Crisfield, Solomons, Oxford, Bay Shore, Deal Island and Piney Point. One of the largest was the Annual Oyster Fleet Race in Tangier Sound.

On November 1, many of the last skipjacks will return to the bay for yet another season of "austering." On their way, about 11 of them are expected to race off Sandy Point State Park as the main attraction of Chesapeake Appreciation Days. The first race begins at 10:40 a.m. and can be easily viewed from shore. A match race of winners will take place on Sunday. Tickets for the water festival are \$3 for adults, \$1 for children up to 16.

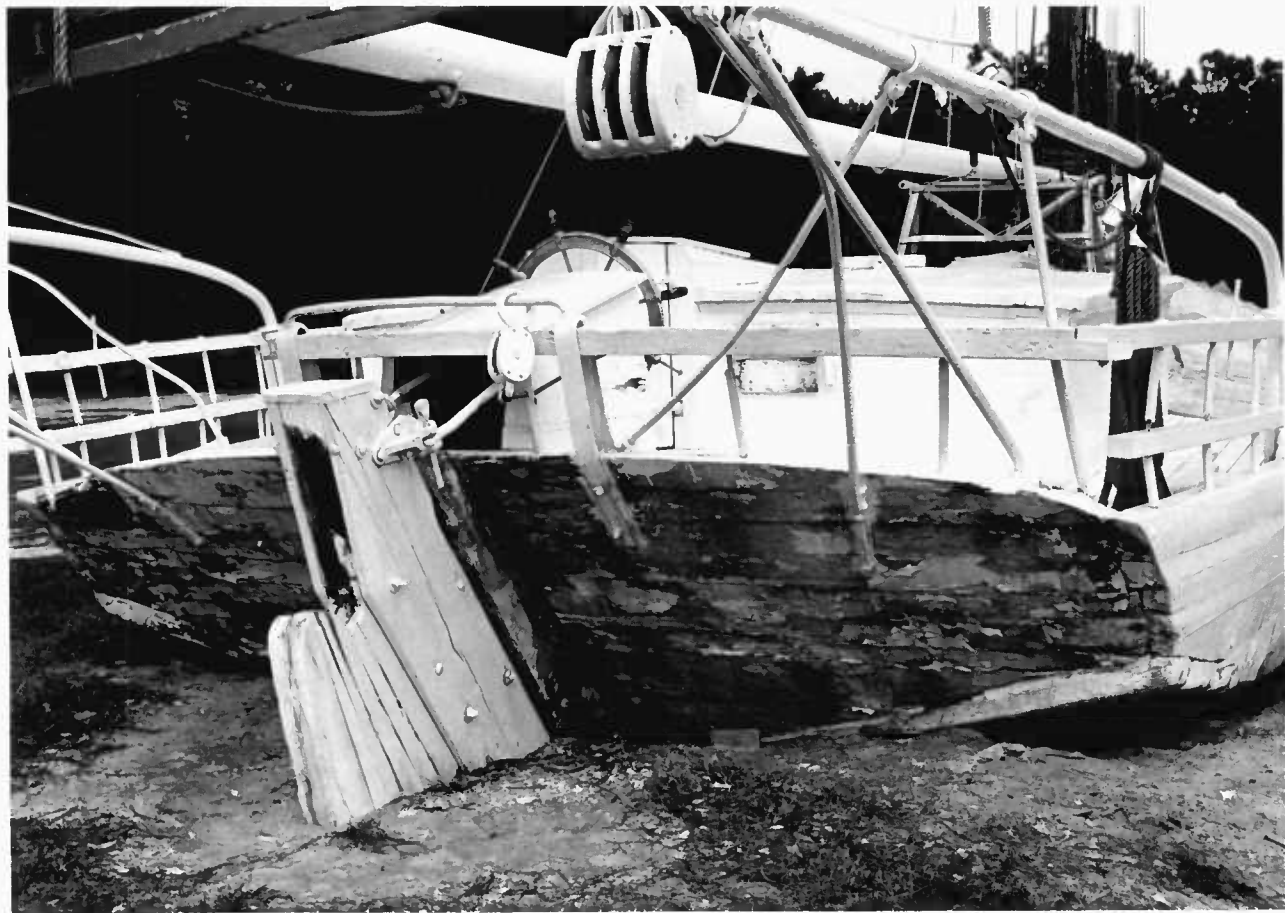
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Because this year's Chesapeake Appreciation Days are November 1 and 2, Robert Nickerson, of Baker Insurance, says yacht owners who want to visit by water may be able to get a free extension on their marine coverage, which usually ends October 31. He suggests checking with your agent.



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Tailboards for skipjack Robert L.
Webster,
park headquarters, Jane's Island
State Park, Crisfield, MD
4/79 EKC



S-114

Skipjack Robert L. Webster
Jane's Island State Park
Crisfield, Maryland

Detail: stern

4/79 E. Coxe



S- 114

Skipjack Robert L. Webster
Jane's Island State Park
Crisfield, Maryland
Detail: decking
4/79 E. Coxe



S- 114

Skipjack Robert L. Webster
Jane's Island State Park
Crisfield, Maryland
Detail: interior of hold
4/79 E. Coxe